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ABSTRACT

The availability of both oral and written historical narratives provides the Readers Theater adapter with a rich opportunity to experiment with mixing oral and written narrative styles in documentary form. Those who plan to use such mixing must consider the differences between oral and written narratives. Writers and readers have almost unlimited time; speakers and listeners do not. Writers can reread at any time; speakers are limited by their ability to recall. Speaking is more personal than writing; writing is more permanent. Intonation, volume, and speed are varied in speech; few exact correlates to these qualities exist in writing. For the adapter, these differences point up different possibilities in tone and sound for scripts and the need for artistic control to develop these possiblities. Unlike the historian, the Readers Theater adapter must sometimes alter original narratives to please audiences without sacrificing the integrity of the script. Oral narratives are particularly useful for injecting dialogue into the scene, for focusing on action, and for preserving regional flavor and humor. Written narratives are valuable for their descriptive language. Rather than stressing the balance of the historian, the adapter should strive for a point of view through selectivity. Narratives can be organized either topically or chronologically. Finally, since a speaker's background has a profound influence on his or her language, obtaining narratives from narrators of different backgrounds is vitally important. (JL)

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SCRIPTING ORAL HISTORY:

AN EXAMINATION OF STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES

by

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Interpreters have long recognized the value of non-fictional literature for performance. Diaries, letters, journals, documents and other primary source material convey the spirit and character of an age as well as the personality of their authors. Such materials provide us with a personal glimpse into history through the eyes of those who lived it. Adapters have found that non-fictional materials offer a wealth of dramatic possibilities and scripts such as "Dear Liar" based on the correspondence of Mrs. Patrick Campbell and G.B. Shaw, suggest that history can be entertaining as well as educational.

During the past decade, Readers Theatre adapters have experimented with a new form of adapting non-fiction--the Readers Theatre documentary. This form is patterned after documentary films and is defined by Kleinau and McHughes as being scripts created from primary source material: "The result is a very different creation from most historical dramas where non-fictional material is used as dialogue for the participants, and it can become as entertaining as any created dialogue with added persuasive potential that no invention can achieve."[1]

Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey's script, "No Sense of Decency," based on documents of the Army-McCarthy hearings is an example of a script utilizing non-fictional materials for persuasive impact. Jeffrey echoes Kleinau and McHughes:

> "The factors that bred and the effects that remain of Joseph McCarthy are no less staggering than the Frankfurt Trials of 'The Investigation', or the implication of guilt by association "In The Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer.' Countless other documentary materials exist and the need

> persists for dramatizing such literature. Students and teachers of oral interpretation can capture this opportunity by tapping these sources of literature that have been left for the novelist to fictionalize when the drama needs only to be discovered rather than created."2

In addition to non-fictional writings such as letters, diaries and journals, another source of historical materials has attracted the attention of Readers Theatre adapters. Oral history has emerged in the past decade as a major tool for historical investigation. Willa Baum defines oral history as "the tape recording of reminiscences about which the narrator can speak from first-hand knowledge. Through pre-planned interviews, the information is captured in question and answer form by oral history interviewers."[3]

The oral history interview is a useful research tool for the historian in several ways. First of all, diaries, letters, and routinely kept memos and records have always been the backgone of historical research, says Baum. However, as the pace of people's lives quickens, accounts of daily contacts may become abbreviated or may simply never be recorded. Oral history interviews provide the historian with a means of filling in the gaps in traditional written source materials.

Oral history also allows the historian to gain access to the history of certain social classes or ethnic groups who have a rich oral tradition, but no written one. This is especially true of Native American groups in the United States.

Finally, the tape recording of oral history preserves the speech patterns of the community. Regional dialects, colloquialisms, and local idioms and storytelling practices are preserved. Real

people speak to us about their own lives in their own words. Richard Dorson comments on this personal quality of oral history, saying, "in literate civilizations the personal sense of history has all but vanished--save in the local community."[4] Larry Danielson adds:

> "The personalization of history--that complicated nexus of art, tradition, comprehension of the past and human psychology--which is crucial in the maintenance of historic consciousness, is a more difficult matter to assess. That it can most easily be studied within the contexts of local oral history, whether community, neighborhood, or family is clear. That the folklorist and the oral historian be involved in its consideration is a necessity."5

The availability of both oral and written historical narratives provides the Readers Theatre adapter with a rich opportunity to experiment with mixing oral and written narrative styles in documentary form. This paper will discuss considerations for mixing oral and written narratives which will include structural differences between the two styles, the necessity for artistic control over the script, the importance of varied, top quality narratives, and the necessity for a definite viewpoint which shapes the script.

Jane Blankenship lists eight differences between the processes of speaking and writing which account for many of the observable differences between oral and written narratives. Six of these differences are relevant to our discussion. These differences include:

1. The element of time in encoding a message.
2. The differences in amount of feedback.

3. The nature of the relationship between speaker-listener and writer-reader.

4. The difference in the degree of permanency.

5. The difference in contrasts afforded by writing and speech for their effects.

6. The element of time in decoding a message.

Time is the major factor which differentiates the encoding of speech and writing, according to Blankenship. The writer has almost unlimited time and resources to formulate his/her diction and to make syntactical choices. The speaker, however, faces his/her listener directly and may not reamin silent for long periods while determining the right word to use. If the right word is not readily available, the speaker must substitute another appropriate one quickly. This time pressure may cause the speaker to choose fewer different words or easier words than does the wirter, making speech less varied than writing. Speakers may also repeat words or phrases to fill the pauses while s/he chooses an appropriate word. Such repetition and disfluencies appear frequently in oral narratives. However, says Blankenship, the more verbally facile the speaker is--the more numerous and difficult words s/he knows and the more frequently s/he uses them--the smaller the difference between written and oral expression will be. "For example, there are only insignificant differences between the word choice in Adlai Stevenson's formal speeches, essays, and interviews. Thus, the more language-conscious a speaker is, and the more often he speaks, the less he will feel the pressure of time."[6] This verbal facility of the speaker/writer, which is often a product of education and social class, is strongly evident in both written and oral narratives and is one of their most important characteristics. The time period

in which the utterance occurred will also have a profound impact on the character of both types of narratives as narratives samples will later show.

Feedback, or the ability of the person to review a spoken or written utterance, is another difference between spoken and written forms. A writer may re-read his/her complete text immediately or weeks after it is written; but a person who is speaking extemporaneously can review only what s/he is able to recall; furthermore, the amount and accuracy of his/her recall are much more limited than the writer's. This partially accounts for the fact that grammatical errors are more common in oral than in written discourse.[7] A speaker may not remember the tense or subject number with which s/he began a sentence, and may even forget specific words. Sych grammatical and usage slips are common in oral transcripts. Again, however, the more frequently a person speaks, the more s/he exercises his/her recall capacity, and is thus less subject to feedback span limitations.

The relationship between the narrator and the audience represents another difference between speaking and writing. Since the speaker confronts his/her listener directly, s/he is more likely to use more personal pronouns and recognition of direct contact; more references to time, place, and occasion; and more interrogative sentences. This is especially true of oral history narratives because they are the result of an interview between the collector and the narrator. Blankenship adds that oral style is more personal, and therefore more verbal in focus, resulting in more verbs and adverbs than in written language which contains more nouns and adjectives.

Andre Martinet says that permanency is the main reason for the differences between oral and written style:

> "The chief reason why people do not write as they speak is probably that since writing leaves permanent traces, whereas speech, unless recorded, is lost (forever) writers are far more careful than speakers..."8

Joseph DeVito made a study of oral and written language and found that oral style was less qualified than written style; meaning that it contained a higher ratio of verbs to adjectives. He explains:

> "Such qualification is probably introduced by the writer as a convenient safeguard to insure that his assertions are not too broad or too general. The permanency of writing forces the writer to be more judicious and more careful in his assertions."9

Differences in contrast is another factor which separates writing from speech. In speech there are many types of contrasts such as volume (loud-soft), pitch (high-low), intonation contours (rising-falling), quality (emotional coloration), but there are few exact correlates for these nonverbal contrasts in writing.

Everyday English writing does not contain conventions for indicating intonation, according to Blankenship. Punctuation marks are helpful guides, but are inexact and versatile. Since a writer lacks the auditory resources of speech, he may need more words to convey the same idea. According to Blankenship: "The lack of auditory resources may be the primary reason for the greater verbal density (numbers of nouns, verbs, descriptive adjectives and adverbs) in written discourse."[10]

The element of time necessary for decoding a message is the final difference between speaking and writing which we will consider.

Both writers and speakers must choose words their audiences will comprehend and respond to, but there are important audience differences. The reader may look up an unfamiliar word in a dictionary, or consult someone else. The listener must decode the message on the spot. Writing can be retained more easily because it is referable. Speakers try to achieve this referability not by choosing simple words and ideas, but by exhibiting greater profuseness-using more amplifying phrases, more synonymous terms; and by restating key ideas to ensure understanding--and simultaneously avoiding repetition.

These differences between writing and speaking are evident in the following oral and written narratives. The first narrator, Sara Cowan, wrote a column in her local newspaper, so we have the opportunity of comparing both the oral and written narratives of a contemporary narrator. The first narratives is selected from her newspaper column, while the second is an oral transcript:

> "Well, today is September 15 and is now about half gone. And it is mollassie making time, oh boy! What fun to feed the old gin mill and watch the mule go around and around.
>
> The reason we have so much sickness these days is because we consume so many sweets, soda pop and candy. Sweets are nice but they lower resistance to infection. Our young people don't know what good eating they're missing, but in our day, the molasses and honey and some brown sugar were all the sweetening we had. Then, our brown sugar came in big barrels. We'd just knock out the plank in one end of the barrels and there it was, shimmering like, and big lumps so good as to melt on the tongue."11

The Devil in the Church House

> Yeah, now here's somethin' I wanta tell ya. Preachers love to tell 'em on one another. y'know. They used to come to my house and stay all night on Pebble Creek. We'd have three, four men at a time come over from

Cum'land River. John would send over there and get 'em in his old gray Chevrolet. And he'd send the boys over there when he couldn't go. 'Cross that mountain. Uncle George Maddox and Joe Caudhill and all of that bunch back in thar. And uh, they'd sit down and tell jokes.

Said, one time they was two men got in a argument and one argued there was a devil and the other argued there wasn't one. This one said, "Now, if there is any such thing as the Devil, it's right here in this town. I know this is the meanest place in the world. Right here in this town!" "Well", other one said, "Let's go hunt'im. Find'im!"

So they started out and they said they went from one end of town to the other a-huntin.' Said, they went in every liquor joint, dance hall and ever' place they could find. He said he thought sure was gonna have to give in to that man that they wasn't no Devil.

Comin''long back, they said, he just give up. Somebody hollered, said, "Hey," he said, "Fellers, you lookin' for me?"

They looked across the street and there he stood in the church house door.

Said, "We're lookin' for ya, but we never thought of lookin' here!" Well, they told 'im where all they been, y'know.

Devil said, "No, I've already got all of them. Now I'm here tryin' to stir up trouble here! He said, "Tryin' to cause confusion in the church!"12

The first narrative is a written one and displays many of the characteristics of written language mentioned by Blankenship. It begins rather breezily, but then does use more formal words such as "consume" and "resistance." There is a heavy emphasis on verbs and adverbs, seventeen total, in this short passage. There are many qualifying words prresent such as "so much,"

"so many," "but," and "some." Additionally, there are many nouns and descriptive verbs present.

In Sara Cowan's oral sample, we can see the characteristic personality of oral style emerging with Cowan's use of "I" and "we." Grammatical errors in Cowan's usage of "was" and "were" appear as well as conversational disfluencies such as "uh." The characteristic of more amplifying phrases and repetition is evident in such phrases as, "preachers love to tell'em on one another, y'know, "cross that mountain,", and "well, they told 'im where all they been, y'know." There are fewer qualifers and there is a great deal more emphasis on verbs than on descriptive adjectives.

These same characteristics are observable in the following two samples which also illustrate the importance of speaker traits such as education, social class, and personality, and time period of the utterance in determining the character of a narrative. The first narrative is an oral history of a contemporary rather uneducated farm wife. The second narrative is a nineteenth century diary entry of a highly educated missionary's wife:

> "My second child was born around midnight and the doctor didn't get there until about four or five o-clock in the morning. It was a regular blizzard in February, oh brother, what a nasty night! I sat up in bed and tied the cord myself. My husband brought me the string and the scissors, and I tied the cord and cuti it, rolled my baby up in her blanket. I had her there in bed beside me by the time my sister-in-law got there to take care of me. I thought, "Oh, boy, I'm gonna have some fun now," because she'd had five or six kids and every darn one of 'em, she'd called the doctor two or three times just a false alarm. She come, and looked in the bedroom, and said, "You all right?" and I said, "Yeah, I'm allright. And she set down by the stove a getti-' warm,

> and pretty soon she says, "I think you're having a false alarm, I might just as well go home." I turned the covers down, and oh, she had a fit...there was the baby laying there."13

> "Awoke about five o'clock a.m. As soon as I moved, I was surprised by a discharge which I supposed indicated approaching confinement. Felt unwilling it should happen in the absence of my husband. I waited a few moments. Soon pains began to come one, and I called for Mrs. Smith who lodged with me. She came, and called her husband. They made what preparations they deemed necessary, then left me to attend worship and breakfast. After which I became quite sick enough--began to feel discouraged. Felt as if I almost wished I'd never been married. But there was no retreating, meet it I must. About eleven I became quite discouraged. I had hoped to be delivered ere then. I was so tired, and knew nothing how long before I should be relieved. But just as I supposed the worst was at hand, my ears were saluted by the cry of my child. A son was the salutation. Soon I forgot my misery in the joy of possessing a proper child. I truly felt to say with Eve, "I have gotten a man from the Lord."14

Both oral narratives employ dialogue and folklorists consider this to be a sign of a competent narrator since dialogue enlivens the story. Richard Dorson examined his favorite samples from his collection for common stylistic features and noted: "One point that had escaped me until they were placed on the dissecting table is their plentiful use of dialouge. The tale becomes fresher, livelier, and clearer when natural conversation is introduced, and avoids a tedious and confusing trait of folk narratives, the ambiguous use of indirect quotations."15

Willard Moore, collector of Cowan's narratives says of them:

> "Sara uses dialogue, mimicry and mime in her narratives. Detailed realism, a sound basis in folk belief, and a delicate use of reality and fantasy make the tales memorable and unique. Her use of dialogue gives immediacy and realism to the story. The short tale about the "Devil in the Church House" and the story of the son's visit to his mother's grave are good examples of lively dialogue which keep the audience interested and involved."16

What do these structural differences between oral and written narratives mean to the adapter? These differences point up different possibilities in tone and sound for scripts and also point up the need for artistic control to develop these possibilities. If the adapter is working with historians on the script, there should be a clear division of labor with historians acting only as resource people. Historians sometimes object to editing narratives on the grounds that changing the wording dilutes or distorts primary source material. It is imperative to bear in mind the difference between the roles of the Readers Theatre documentarist and the historian. Kleinau and McHughes caution us that:

> "Readers Theatre documentarists cannot presume to be creators of factual scripts any more than documentary filmmakers can presume to show us reality. Filmmakers show us their reality or their creative treatment of actuality, because they make the choices of what to film and what we shall see. As script compilers, we select, arrange, and edit material to creat our actuality; this is where our creative abilities are used. We create a presentational from by transforming through selection, alteration, rearrangement, and conversion a collection of nonfiction sources."17

Thus, when alterations of the original narration are in question, the integrity of the script should be the deciding factor. Oral narratives in particular may require judicious editing to remove some of their disfluencies and repetition which could make them monotonous for an audience. Adapters will find that oral narratives are particularly useful for injecting dialogue into the scene, for focusing on action, and for preserving regional dialects, colloquialisms, humor, and speech idioms. Written narratives may have to be pared to reduce their length and still retain the descriptive language which is one of their hallmarks.

These structural differences also show the need for a definite point of view to shape the script and give it focus and direction. Historians are sometimes concerned with presenting a balanced treatment of an issue to the point that every view is retained and nothing is emphasized. Narratives which show contrasting viewpoints can provide a fascinating insight into the different perspectives on historical figures and events, but verbatim quotations without selectivity amount to mere records rather than theatre.

The adapter will also have to decide between a topical or a chronological approach. Two recent Readers Theatre documentaries using oral and written history, "Palouse Past," and "On Stage With Washington Women," both utilized a topical organization. This approach enabled the script to cover a variety of issues over a large time span, but made it more difficult to achieve a dramatic climax since no one character or event was sustained throughout the script. A chronological approach

would allow the script to focus on characters or subjects in greater depth.

Though the availability of both written and oral narratives offers the adapter a great potential for variety, the importance of obtaining narratives from narrators of varied backgrounds cannot be emphasized too strongly. A speaker's educational and social background has a profound influence on the language of his/her narratives. The adapter must be free as well to conduct interviews or further archival research to search out narratives that will fill in gaps in the adapter's range of materials.

As we have seen, the structural differences between oral and written narratives require the adapter's consideration. The element of time involved in encoding a message, the differences in the amount of feedback, the nature of the relationship between speaker-listener and writer-reader, the difference in the degree of permancency, differences in contrast and decoding time all affect narrative style. The availability of non-fictional material in these two narrative styles offers the Readers Theatre documentarist exciting opportunities for a creative treatment of history. If the adapter is willing to exercise artistic control over the shaping of the materials, s/he will have the satisfaction of sharing with an audience the spoken and written voices of the past.

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